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THE FOLK-LORE OF THE HORSESHOE.¹

As a practical device for the protection of horses' feet, the utility of the iron horseshoe has long been generally recognized, and for centuries, in countries widely separated, it has also been popularly used as a talisman for the preservation of buildings or premises from the wiles of witches or fiends.

What were the reasons for the general adoption of the horseshoe as an emblem of good luck? Various explanations have found favor.

I. *Imaginary Connection with the Jewish Passover.* As the blood sprinkled upon the doorposts and lintel of the house, at the time of the great Jewish feast, formed the chief points of an arch, it has been conceived that with this memory in mind the horseshoe was adopted as an arch-shaped talisman, and hence became emblematic of good luck. The same thought might be supposed to underlie the practice of peasants in the west of Scotland, who train the boughs of the rowan, or mountain-ash tree, in the form of an arch over a farmyard gate, in order to protect their cattle from evil.²

II. *A Serpent Emblem.* The theory has been advanced that in ancient times the horseshoe in its primitive form was a symbol relating to serpent-worship, and that its superstitious use as a charm may hence have originated. There is a resemblance between the horseshoe and the arched body of a snake, when the latter is so convoluted that its head and tail correspond to the horseshoe prongs. In front of a church in Crendi, a town in the southern part of the island of Malta, there is to be seen a statue having at its feet a protective symbol in the shape of a half-moon encircled by a snake.³

III. *A Moon Emblem.* From earliest times the crescent moon has been thought by the ignorant to have an influence over the crops, and, indeed, over many of the affairs of life. Hence, doubtless, arose a belief in the value of crescent-shaped and cornute objects as amulets and charms, and of these the horseshoe is the one most commonly available, and therefore the one most generally used. In his work entitled "The Evil Eye" (London, 1895), Mr. F. T. Elworthy calls attention to the fact that the half moon was often placed on the heads of certain of the most powerful Egyptian deities, and therefore when worn became a symbol of their worship. The use of such symbols is not obsolete; the brass crescent, an avowed charm

¹ Abstract of paper read at the Seventh Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society, Philadelphia, December 28, 1895.

² J. Napier, *Folk-Lore*, Paisley, 1879, p. 51.

³ *All the Year Round*, N. S., vol. xxxix. 1887.

against the evil eye, is very commonly attached to the elaborately decorated harnesses of Neapolitan draught horses, and is used in the East to embellish the trappings of elephants. It is employed in the same manner in various parts of Europe and even in England.

IV. *A Phallic Emblem.* It must suffice to mention this theory of the origin of the superstitious use of the horseshoe. The evidence in its favor is meagre, resting chiefly upon the employment of amulets of this character.

V. *Prong-shaped.* The supernatural qualities of the horseshoe as a preservative against imaginary demons have been supposed due to its bifurcated shape, as any object having two prongs or forks was formerly thought to be effective for this purpose. Hence has been considered to be derived the alleged efficacy as amulets of horseshoes, the horns and tusks of animals, the talons of birds, and the claws of wild beasts and reptiles. Such a custom is expressed in the oft-quoted lines from Herrick's "Hesperides:" "Hang up hooks and shears to scare the hag that rides the mare." In West Africa, where the horns of wild animals are esteemed as fiend-scarers, a large horn filled with mud, and having three small horns attached to its lower end, is used as a safeguard to prevent slaves from running away.¹ In the vicinity of Mirzapur, in Central Hindostan, the Horwas tie on the necks of their children the roots of certain jungle-plants as protective charms, their efficacy being thought to depend on their resemblance to the horns of certain wild beasts. The Mohammedans of Northern India use a certain amulet composed in part of a tiger's claw and two claws of the large horned owl, with the tips facing outward.²

Amulets fashioned in the shape of horns and crescents are popular among Neapolitans, as shown by Elworthy. In Southern Spain, according to George Borrow, the stag's horn is a favorite talisman, believed to dissipate the effect of the evil eye. The antiquity of the *mano cornuta*, or anti-witch gesture, common in Italy, is proven by its representation in ancient paintings unearthed at Pompeii. So in Norway, horns are placed over the doors of farm buildings in order to scare away demons; and this virtue may be the ultimate reason why the fine antlers which grace the homes of successful hunters are regarded as of especial value.

VI. *The Horse as a Sacred Animal.* Returning to the horseshoe, we find that its efficacy as a protector of persons and buildings depends not merely on its arched or bifurcated shape; its relation to the horse also gives it a talismanic worth, for in legendary lore this animal was often credited with supernatural qualities. Among

¹ Cameron, *Across Africa*.

² W. Crooke, *North Indian Folk-Lore*, p. 209.

early Celts, Teutons, and Slavs horse-worship was prevalent. In Northern India, also, the horse is regarded as a lucky animal; thus, when an equestrian rides into a field of sugar-cane in the planting season the event is considered auspicious. In the same region the froth from a horse's mouth is thought to repel demons, which are believed to have more fear of him than of any other animal. The use of the horseshoe against witches has been ascribed to the Scandinavian superstition known as the Demon-mare.¹ In early times, in German countries, it was customary to use horses' heads as talismans, and in Mecklenburg and Holstein it is still a common practice to place the carved wooden representations of the heads of horses on the gables of houses as safeguards.²

VII. *The Virtues of Iron.* Some writers have maintained that the luck associated with the horseshoe is due chiefly to the metal, irrespective of its shape, as iron and steel are traditional charms against malevolent spirits and goblins. In their view a horseshoe is simply a piece of iron of graceful shape and convenient form, commonly pierced with seven nail-holes, and a suitable talisman to be affixed to the door of dwelling or stable in conformity with a venerable custom sanctioned by centuries of usage. Of the antiquity of the belief in the supernatural properties of iron there can be no doubt. Pliny states that iron coffin-nails affixed to the lintel of the door render the inmates of the dwelling secure from the visitations of prowling nocturnal spirits. The demons called Jinn are believed to be exorcised by the mere name of iron;³ and Arabs, when overtaken by the simoom in the desert, are said to charm away the spirits of evil by crying "Iron! Iron!"

In China a piece of an old iron plough-point serves as a charm, and long iron nails are also driven into trees to exorcise certain dangerous female demons.⁴

Among Scotch fishermen, even at the present time, iron is said to be invested with magical attributes. Thus, if when plying their vocation one of their number chance to indulge in profanity, the others at once call out "Cauld Airn," and each grasps a convenient piece of the metal as a counter-influence to the misfortune which otherwise would pursue them through the day.⁵

In England, in default of a horseshoe, the iron plates of the heavy shoes worn by farm laborers are occasionally to be seen fastened to the doors of cottages.⁶

¹ M. D. Conway, *Demonology and Devil Lore*, vol. ii. p. 372.

² J. B. Friedreich, *Die Symbolik und Mythologie der Natur*.

³ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*.

⁴ J. Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese*.

⁵ *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. vii. 1889.

⁶ J. Larwood and J. C. Hotten, *The History of Signboards*, p. 179.

In Sicily iron amulets are popularly used against the evil eye. Iron in any form, especially the horseshoe, is thought to be effective; indeed, talismanic properties are ascribed to all metals. When, therefore, a Sicilian feels that he is being "overlooked," he instantly touches the first available metallic object, such as his watch-chain, keys, or coins.¹

An ingenious theory ascribes the origin of this belief in the magical properties of iron to the early employment of actual cautery and to the use of the lancet in surgery.² In either case, the healing effects of the instrument, whether hot or in the form of a knife, have been attributed by superstitious minds to magical properties in the metal, whereby the demons who cause disease are put to flight.

VIII. *Proper Position.* The talisman effectively bars the ingress of witches and evil spirits, but an entrance once obtained it is powerless to expel them. Hence the belief, prevalent in Germany, that a horseshoe found on the road and nailed on the threshold of a house, with the points directed outward, is a mighty protection, not only against hags and fiends, but also against fire and lightning; but reversed it brings misfortune.

In Bohemia, only, is said to prevail a superstition exactly opposite; namely, that whoever picks up a horseshoe thereby picks up ill luck for himself, a notable example of the exception which proves the rule.³

IX. *Number of Nails.* As a rule, the degree of luck pertaining to a horseshoe found by chance has been thought to depend on the number of nails remaining in it; the more nails the more luck.⁴ In Northumberland the holes free of nails are counted, as these indicate, presumably in years, how soon the finder of the shoe may expect to be married.⁵

X. *Resemblance to Meniscus.* The employment of the horseshoe as a charm has also been ascribed to its resemblance in shape to the metallic meniscus, or halo, formerly placed over the heads of images of patron saints in churches, and represented in ancient pictures. In later times, crescent-shaped pieces of metal were sometimes nailed up at the doors of churches. The horseshoe might have been an available substitute, and therefore placed upon the doors of the main entrances of churches, especially in the southwest of England, as it was believed that evil spirits could enter even consecrated edifices. Within recent years two horseshoes were to be seen on the

¹ G. Pitre, *Usi e costumi credenze e pregiudizi del popolo Siciliano*, Palermo, 1889.

² W. Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of Northern India*, p. 192.

³ A. Wuttke, *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube*, 1869.

⁴ R. Thorne, *A Dictionary of Rare and Curious Information*, p. 232.

⁵ *Denham Tracts*.

door of the parish church of Haccombe, in Devonshire. A ballad, supposed to have been written by a master of Exeter Grammar School, in the early part of the nineteenth century, graphically describes a race for a wager, won by a certain Earl of Totness, who after his victory rides straight to the door of Haccombe Church:—

And there he fell on his knees and prayed,
And many an Ave Maria said.
Bread and money he gave to the poor;
And he nailed the roan's shoes to the chapel door.¹

Whatever may be the origin of the superstitious employment of the horseshoe, its adoption as a token of good luck appears to be comparatively modern, its earliest use having been for the exclusion of witches, evil spirits, and all such uncanny beings.

Before leaving the subject, an extract may be cited from an article contained in a periodical of the eighteenth century against the repeal of the so-called Witch Act, wherein the writer offers the following satirical advice: "To secure yourself against the enchantments of witches, especially if you are a person of fashion and have never been taught the Lord's Prayer, the only method I know is to nail a horseshoe upon the threshold. This I can affirm to be of the greatest efficacy, insomuch that I have taken notice of many a little cottage in the country with a horseshoe at its door, where gaming, extravagance, Jacobitism, and all the catalogue of witchcrafts have been totally unknown."

Robert M. Lawrence.

¹ *Belgravia*, vol. iv. 1887.